

Eric Voegelin and Literary Theory

by Eugene Webb

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Eric Voegelin was a philosopher and political theorist, but he was also widely read in literature, and his general framework of thought gave a central place to the mythic imagination — of which we might take literature in the modern sense to be at least a province. He also referred to specifically literary works occasionally in his writings, and in at least one case, that of Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, in the letter to the critic Robert Heilman (1947) and a later “Postscript” to it (1970),¹ he offered an extensive analysis of a classic example of literary modernism. I would like in this essay to explore some of the ways Voegelin’s thought might be seen to relate to the main issues of contemporary literary theory.

It would not take very long, of course, for his readers to guess what Voegelin might have thought about much of what today goes by the name of literary theory — and I can confirm anecdotally that the guess would be correct; he once sent me, with amusement, as well as a certain scorn, a parody of post-structuralist theory he had clipped from the *Times Literary Supplement* (April 21, 1978, pp. 440-41). It consists of a commentary on and an excerpt from a purported piece of critical writing (entitled *Glggl*) by a purported theorist named Hendrik de Stijl. The title is a one-upping (or as they might say more elegantly in French, a *surenchèrement*), of Derrida’s *Glas*, which a real critic in *Diacritics* (who will here be left anonymous) quoted by de Stijl’s supposed commentator, Msistislav Bogdanovich, said combined the death knell (its meaning in French) with “the sound of the spit in the throat and the death rattle; in fact... all the sticky agglutinative gurgling of the

body as such.” As Bogdanovich says, “in the face of de Stijl’s *Nullisme*, how pale, how quaintly *serious*, is Derrida’s nihilism after all!”

Clearly this and its real-life analogues would not be Voegelin’s idea of theory, but there has been more to literary theory than merely that, and many of its issues are ones he would have had to take seriously if he had gone into them. Moreover, although Voegelin never himself formulated an explicit theory of literature to compete with those he considered ridiculous, it is possible to see the outlines of one in some of his statements about literature in his references to Greek tragedy and to the analyses of particular works of literature that appear now and then among his writings.

Modern literary theory has had basically two thrusts. One — deriving from the effort of romantic, organic unity theorists, such as Coleridge, the French Symbolists, and the New Critics, among others, to define literature as a unique form of discourse — emphasizes literature’s radical autonomy, its contemplative objectivity. The other, deriving from positivists and ideological social activists such as Sainte-Beuve, Marx, Taine, and Zola, emphasizes the relation of literature to social and historical determinants. In a recent survey, Murray Krieger has suggested that despite their surface differences and their mutual vituperations, both the New Critics and the deconstructionists can be considered expressions of the former trend, while the New Historicists of today can be seen as expressions of the latter.² Standing back from the mutual antagonisms of these camps, Krieger advocates a balanced view that would see partial truth on each side of the debate — a position that sounds very sensible, of course, since if either were exclusively correct we would all be stuck in the literary equivalent of a sterile spirit vs. matter dualism. But do these antitheses exhaust the alternatives of interpretation? And is a synthesis of them the only thing that would make sense of our human experience of simultaneous involvement in and transcendence of the flux of history?

Voegelin’s thought offers a third, quite different perspective. As he sees it, the literary imagination reflects the mode of existence of the historical individuals who give it

expression, and their modes of existence in turn, depending on the individual's resistance or submission to the surrounding culture, may be representative of more widespread patterns in their society. These modes of existence fall basically into two types, which Voegelin referred to as "open" and "closed." Open existence is the mode that consciously directs itself toward reality, in all its dimensions, the spiritual as well as the material. Since the experience of human existence, for Voegelin, involves a sense of tension, of imperfection and lack of satisfaction, that could be assuaged only by a fullness beyond the reach of humanity, open existence necessarily must be an openness to a certain measure of suffering, a willingness to endure both the love of what is beyond us and the fact that it remains forever beyond. Open existence, in other words, is openness to existence under the conditions of finitude. Closed existence is a tendency to close oneself to existence, to pull back from living with full consciousness in reality — with the reality in question being understood to include experiential, cognitive, and moral dimensions. One can give oneself to life or withhold oneself from it on any of these levels. This means, therefore, that Voegelin's thought tends ultimately toward a concern not just with the aesthetic good but with existential truth and with the good of existential decision, and his deepest objection to much of modern literary theory would be its tendency to bypass such issues — although it should be said that there have also been modern critics who have been as open to them as he was and whom he admired. A few who come to mind are Robert Heilman himself, Cleanth Brooks, and Northrop Frye.

We can see something of what Voegelin thought literature in its ultimate development as an expression of open existence could be if we consider his conception of Greek tragedy. He discussed this in the *The World of the Polis*, the second volume of his *Order and History*.³ As Voegelin saw it, tragedy was an essential element in the remarkable cultural enterprise that took place through the confluence of philosophy and literary imagination during that brief but historically pregnant period in which "[p]ower and spirit were linked in history for one golden hour through the inseparable events of the

Athenian victory in the Persian War and the Aeschylean creation of the tragedy” (p. 243). Tragedy, he says, “continues the search for truth” by participating “in the great search for truth from Hesiod to the mystic-philosophers” (that is, Parmenides, Heraclitus, and others, including Plato).

The material of tragedy was myth, but myth removed from its story-telling mode in Homer or its speculative mode in Hesiod. In tragedy myth is no longer primarily the aesthetic imitation of an action or the use of such imitation as an instrument of philosophical problem-solving. Rather, as Voegelin put it, “[t]he truth of the tragedy is action itself, that is, action on the new, differentiated level of a movement in the soul that culminates in the decision (*proairesis*) of a mature, responsible man. The newly discovered humanity of the soul expands into the realm of action. Tragedy as a form is the study of the human soul in the process of making decisions, while the single tragedies construct conditions and experimental situations, in which a fully developed, self-conscious soul is forced into action” (ibid.). This is what he meant when he said that “[f]rom its very beginning the tragedy was established as a cult-institution of the people” (p. 244); its performance and witnessing was a spiritual exercise designed to elicit in the participants a sense of existential possibilities and to call them toward their actualization in responsible personhood. (Voegelin illustrates his point with an analysis of Aeschylus’s *Suppliants*, the whole thrust of which is toward the decision of the polis to commit itself to justice in giving refuge to the Danaides, who are fleeing from forced marriage to the sons of Aegyptus.)

Voegelin’s comment on Aristotle’s treatment of tragedy makes clear his distance from any merely aestheticizing theory of literature:

The disintegration of tragedy is complete when we reach the standard treatise on the subject, the *Poetics* of Aristotle. Tragedy has become a literary genus, to be dissected with regard to its formal characteristics, its “parts.” It is the most important genus because of its formal complexity; he who understands tragedy has understood all other literary forms. As far as the substance and historical function

of tragedy is concerned, however, there is barely an elusive hint in the *Poetics*; obviously the problem had moved for Aristotle entirely beyond his horizon of interests. (P. 246)

It is not only literary theory, however, that can bypass the existential issues Voegelin focused on. Literature itself can also obscure them even as it tries, at least in part, to address them. Because the literary imagination reflects the mode of existence of the historical individuals who give it expression, works of literature cannot fail to disclose something about existential possibilities and situations, and when they are expressions of open existence, they do so clearly. When they are expressions of existential closure, on the other hand, the movement of closure is itself given voice and form and thereby made available for reflection; but this may be in a way that is not only unclear but positively obstructive.

Voegelin's major treatment of this type of problem was his discussion of *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James. Robert Heilman writes in his "Foreword" to the published letter that Voegelin had asked him about James, who he heard was being much discussed at the time (both were teaching at Louisiana State University in a period when it had a very lively English faculty).⁴ Heilman suggested he read *The Turn of the Screw* and also gave him some essays of his own about it. About three days later, Voegelin sent him the letter with his own analysis. In it Voegelin described the work as "a study, not of the mystery of good and evil only, but of this mystery in relation to the complex of consciousness-conscience-virtue" and especially of the Puritan variant of this complex (p. 135). The story is told from the point of view of a governess who has been charged by her young and handsome employer with the care of two children of whom he is the guardian, his nephew (Miles) and niece (Flora). He has imposed on the governess the condition of never disturbing him about them but handling all problems herself, a condition she zealously undertakes to fulfill, even when serious problems arise. The story is probably familiar to every reader of this essay, so I need hardly mention that the particular problems that come up have to do with possible ghostly influences of a sinister sort involving an earlier butler

(Quint) and governess (Miss Jessel), since deceased, and that it ends with the death of the boy.

What interested Voegelin especially was the governess's intentness on resisting any temptation to appeal for help from a higher power (the employer). Voegelin thought that this was an expression of a deeply rooted will to self-salvation, growing out of a secularized version of America's Puritan heritage. He interprets the employer as a symbol of God, the governess as a symbol of the soul, and the simple housekeeper, who sees no ghosts and finds it difficult to believe the governess's suspicions, as a symbol of common-sense existence. "From the beginning," Voegelin says in the letter, "James has defined his study carefully as a study of the demonically closed soul; of a soul which is possessed by the pride of handling the problem of good and evil by its own means; and the means which is at the disposition of this soul is the self-mastery and control of the spiritual forces (the symbol of the governess) — ending in a horrible defeat" (p. 136).

Voegelin also brings up another major point: that there are hints of incestuous fascination in the picture of the relation between Miles and Flora and that the other relationships — between Quint and Miss Jessel (who are said in the story to have been "united by an unspeakable bond"), the employer and the governess, and Miles and the governess — all have erotic, incestuous overtones. With this pattern in mind, Voegelin suggests that "the ultimate, metaphysical conception of James goes back to a vision of the cosmic drama of good and evil and an incestuous affair in the divinity" (p. 148) that is, a project of utopian self-sufficiency on the part of spiritual forces turned in on themselves by closure against what would be genuinely beyond them. He concludes that James is dealing with "the problem of self-salvation through the demonically closed human will that plagued everybody in the nineteenth century..." (p. 149), and he closes with an expression of admiration for James's artistic achievement in representing it.

That was in 1947. In 1970 when he wrote the "Postscript: On Paradise and Revolution," he was no longer so admiring, nor would he have said as he did earlier that

“James defined his study carefully as a study of the demonically closed soul.” Now he saw James not so much as a careful, deliberate artist but rather as a somewhat confused one who was himself implicated in a syndrome that the work only partially analyzes. Voegelin said he did not choose to take advantage of the occasion of the letter’s publication to carry forward his analysis of James’s story because, he said, “I no longer believe that James’s symbolism permits a direct translation into the language of philosophy at all” (p. 150), by which he meant that its implications for an understanding of human existence could not be made clear. “Even while writing the letter,” he said, “I was uneasily aware of an incongruence between the meaning I tried to establish in terms of God and man, the Puritan soul and common sense, the passion of self-salvation, grace and damnation, and the Jamesian symbols which carried these meanings distinctly but surrounded by a ghostly aura of indistinctness. Even worse, when later I tried to pursue the symbols through the labyrinth of the story, the distinct core tended to be shrouded by the foginess of meaning that pervaded the work as a whole” (ibid.).

Voegelin makes a passing reference to a need “to reconsider the assumptions under which the interpretation of a symbolistic work of art was undertaken twenty years ago” (ibid.). He does not mention what these were, but the thought is not hard to fill in, and doing so will make more explicit how Voegelin relates to the principal theoretical stances in the field. Here he is clearly alluding to the pattern of thought associated with the “symbolist” approach to interpretation, which has a long history running from romanticism through the Symbolist movement and continuing through Russian Formalism and the New Criticism, which was the principal school Voegelin would have encountered when reading the story. (His friend Robert Heilman was himself a leading figure in that school of thought, as was Cleanth Brooks, who also taught at Louisiana State University.)⁵ Broadly speaking, the symbolist approach emphasized three principal points. One was the irreducibility of literary meaning to any conceptual paraphrase. This is a point Voegelin would not have quarreled with, since his conception of philosophical myth is closely related

to it. Another was its independence from the intentions of the author. Again Voegelin would have agreed, since the extent to which the work reflects the author's mode of existence and his relation to existential issues is likely to exceed the author's explicit understanding. In the case of *The Turn of the Screw* he began the letter to Heilman by saying that "the basis for the analysis of a literary work must be the work itself; if the author has expressed himself on the meaning of his work, such utterances are most valuable if they clear up obscure points; but if (as it seems to be in this case) the utterances of the author are in open conflict with the text of his work, then the meaning offered by the text has to prevail" ("Letter," p. 135).

But another element of the symbolist approach to literature that Voegelin would have found more problematic is its tendency to think of ambiguity as such as a literary value — so that the mind is drawn into an endless process of mental play that has no purpose beyond itself. A classic symbolist gesture of this sort would be Molloy's game with the sucking-stones in Beckett's novel of that name, as well as the same character's delight in the possibility of wondering endlessly about the possible use of a small implement (which seems in reality to be merely a knife rest, though Molloy — fortunately for his purpose — never guesses that). A classic statement of the principle is Mallarmé's "Le sens trop précis rature/ Ta vague littérature" (the last lines of his "Toute l'âme résumée..."). Voegelin would have suspected that this conception of the goal of literature was an attempt to close it in on itself and thus make it an instrument of spiritual evasion rather than of exploration.

It was precisely this last tendency that Voegelin thought he found in James's *The Turn of the Screw*, where, he wrote in 1970, "the fuzziness of the symbols, as well as the general fogginess of meaning pervading the work, is caused rather by a certain deformation of personal and social reality that was experienced as such by artists at the turn of the century and expressed by means of symbolistic art. The indistinctness and ambiguity is inherent to the symbols which express deformed reality" (p. 151). He went on to say that the deformation in question was "the fateful shift in Western society from existence in

openness toward the cosmos to existence in the mode of closure against, and denial of, its reality. As the process gains momentum, the symbols of open existence — God, man, the divine origin of the cosmos, and the divine logos permeating its order — lose the vitality of their truth and are eclipsed by the imagery of a self-creative, self-realizing, self-expressing, self-ordering, and self-saving ego that is thrown into, and confronted with, an immanently closed world” (ibid.). What makes the literature that grows out of this cultural pattern so ambiguous is not simply that it cultivates ambiguity for aesthetic reasons with an artistry that remains in control of it; rather, “[t]he artists... place themselves in the situation of deformed existence and develop symbols that will express their experience, as it were, from within the deformation” (ibid.)—thus preventing its clear thematization in the work. Classical tragedy, in Voegelin’s conception, had as its function to elicit in its audience a clear awareness of the existential issues underlying their lives, but “[a] Romantic or Symbolistic work of art is not an Aeschylean drama in which the full articulation of various tensions is the mode of consciousness that makes the drama a tragedy” (p. 152). Rather than clarifying issues for the sake of decision, this later type of literature merely gave articulate form to the confusions of its age and helped to keep its readers bound by them.

Lest this should give the impression, however, that Voegelin dismissed all of modern literature as an expression of confusion and closure of existence, I would like to mention one other example that will help to round out this picture of Voegelin’s way of analyzing literature in existential terms, his discussion of a poem by Baudelaire that I brought to his attention in the late 1970s. He discusses it in, “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme: A Meditation.”⁶ This was originally a lecture given at the Eranos conference of 1977 at Ascona, Switzerland. While he was preparing it, I happened to be teaching a seminar on the Symbolist Movement and had been struck in reading Baudelaire’s “Au lecteur,” the prefatory poem to his *Fleurs du mal*, by the parallel (and of course contrast) between its imagery and that of Plato’s philosophical myth (in Book I of *The Laws*), which is described as a “true story” and a “saving tale,” of man as a puppet pulled by diverse cords; we are

drawn by the golden cord of Nous (our capacity for reason and will) but also by the iron cords of the passions and desires, and we must resist the pull of the others in order to sense and yield ourselves to the gentle, upward pull of the golden one.

Baudelaire's image is of Satan as Hermetic sage enchanting us and vaporizing, through a sort of reverse alchemy, the gold of our capacity for reasonable and responsible decision:

Sur l'oreiller du mal c'est Satan Trismégiste
 Qui berce longuement notre esprit enchanté,
 Et le riche métal de notre volonté
 Est tout vaporisé par ce savant chimiste.
 C'est le Diable qui tient les fils qui nous remuent.

[At the pillow of evil, it is Satan Trismegistus
 who sings a long lullabye to our enchanted mind,
 and the rich metal of our will
 is completely vaporized by this sage chemist.
 It is the Devil who pulls the cords that move us.]

The reference to the Devil pulling our puppet strings so distinctly echoes Plato's image that there seems good reason to think Baudelaire was consciously alluding to it (and he does make explicit references to Plato in some of his other writings). When I told Voegelin about the poem, he found the similarity as striking as I did (and was generous beyond any scholarly obligation in giving me credit in a footnote for pointing it out to him).

Voegelin's discussion of this passage addresses a case midway between that of classical tragedy and such a work as *The Turn of the Screw*. He thought Aeschylus himself clearly understood what open existence was and consciously set out to evoke a decision for it in his audience. In Henry James's case, on the other hand, he thought the author was

unclear about it and used his art in a way that obscured the issues — though not exactly deliberately, since he lacked sufficient clarity himself to be capable of deliberateness regarding them. He considered Baudelaire a mixed case. His essay brought Baudelaire in to contrast him with Hegel, who Voegelin thought consciously rejected Plato's idea of human dependency on a divine Beyond — which is what Plato's myth represents by its imagery, since there it is Zeus who draws us upward by the golden cord of Nous. Hegel's philosophical *oeuvre* Voegelin considered to amount to a counter-myth of human self-divinization, since it reduces the Absolute to something that depends on human consciousness to attain consciousness of itself. Baudelaire, in contrast, “did not conceive of his symbolism as an improvement on [Plato's] ‘true story’” (p. 341). His revision of the symbolism to put the Devil in the place of Plato's God expressed Hegel's experience of estrangement from any real beyond, with the Devil serving as an image of “man himself when he indulges his imagination to the extreme of self divinization” (p. 342). “By his variant,” says Voegelin, Baudelaire “did not symbolize the balance of consciousness but, on the contrary, the consequences of its loss. He had experienced the ‘modern man’ of his time as being a diseased mind engaged in the sorcery of self-divinization; he had lived through the Satanistic situation without letting it impair his intellectual order; and he could, therefore, understand the imbalance of consciousness analytically by the criteria of balance” (p. 341).

Baudelaire, in effect, used the Platonic language to create a new “saving tale” for those modern hearers who would heed it, and as Voegelin puts it, in a comment of the first importance for understanding his implicit theory of literature, “[t]he saving tale is more than a tale of salvation; it is the tale that saves” (p. 370).

To do this, however, it must communicate. *The Turn of the Screw* did not do so effectively because it merely expressed, and did not elucidate, the spiritual problems of its surrounding culture. Such literature shifts to the reader the burden of penetrating the problem and raising its issues into consciousness: “The reader, in order to extract the full

meaning, must supply the critical consciousness of reality, as well as the range of its possible deformation, which in the work itself does not become sufficiently thematic” (“Postscript,” p. 152), and even a reader capable of doing that will still be left wondering frequently “whether a symbolism remains obscure because his own consciousness is not comprehensive enough to grasp the point, or because the author’s critical consciousness had not been good enough to make it” (ibid.).

With regard to the traditional distinction, classically formulated by Horace as that between the *dulce* and the *utile*, the entertainment and instructional functions of literature (*Ars Poetica*, 343), Voegelin, like Horace, emphasized the power of literature to edify. But for him this edification went well beyond anything a Horace would have conceived, since what mattered to Voegelin was not the delivery of objective content but the way the work could assist the reader in a process of subjective transformation. What he was looking for above all was differentiation of consciousness and realization of open existence.

To some this might still make Voegelin sound like a didactic moralist with an ideology that a critic following his practice would end up projecting into every work. This would be a misleading interpretation of his thought, however. Although his critique of the culture of closed existence often takes on what might be called a moralistic tone, Voegelin really should be considered less a moralist than a spiritual realist. He believed that openness is not an imperative imposed either by a sort of Kantian rationality or by the arbitrary command of a supreme being. Rather openness and closedness are existential possibilities constituted by ways of relating to the structure of reality as such. In terms of the opposition between egoistic self-salvation and receptivity to divine grace that he saw in *The Turn of the Screw*, Voegelin believed that the theological language of grace was a way of talking about the graciousness inherent in the structure of existence itself. The openness he advocated is receptivity to participation in a reality that is always ready to receive those who will receive it in turn. Openness conceived in this way is not so much a matter of obligation as of opportunity. It is not a matter of subordinating one’s wishes to another will

that stands in opposition to them; rather, it is one of discovering a genuine fulfillment that can satisfy the deep appetite for existence that underlies all our other desires, even if in our confusion we often mistakenly seek that satisfaction in utopian dreams and an impossible self-sufficiency. To come to realize where our true satisfaction lies is what makes it possible for us to become truly ourselves and to realize genuine freedom in the decision for open existence.

Voegelin would have opposed any form of structuralism or of ideology critique that would emphasize impersonal forces as determinants of human possibilities. History, for him, was a field of existential possibility, of invitation and opportunity, even if the choice of closed existence reduced the range of the personal in a given individual's life and could contribute to a culture of closure that those seeking open existence would need to resist.

Therefore, although Voegelin is sometimes naively interpreted as a kind of conservative ideologist, if one were to think about how to situate him in the tug of war Krieger refers to between ideologists and counter-ideologists (*Institution of Theory*, ch. 3), Voegelin's philosophical principles would clearly place him in the latter camp. They do imply the value of political freedom, but this does not necessarily constitute a political ideology, since freedom, in the form that matters most — that is, the freedom of open existence — can be realized within the framework of any political system that does not try to impose uniformity of thinking. What the social and political world must offer above all if open existence is to be able to flourish, is the opportunity to think freely and engage in open dialogue with others.

This points to another feature of Voegelin's thought that must also be included in this sketch of his implicit theory of literature: its emphasis on dialogue as an element of open existence. Nothing he said about literature as such was explicitly linked to this topic, but it is a major theme of Voegelin's thought, just as it is also of recent literary theory. Surprising as it might seem to situate Voegelin in proximity to a critic like Paul de Man, for example, both nevertheless share the belief that to fulfill its proper function literature must

be allowed to surprise us, to speak to us of and from a point of view other than our own. Or to mention another figure Voegelin read and appreciated, there is Mikhail Bakhtin.⁷

Bakhtin had many facets.⁸ What Voegelin could be expected to have found congenial in him would have been his ideas of the dialogic imagination (as compared with the monological) and of the unfinalizability of both literature and human life. One might compare, for example, Bakhtin's declaration that "[n]othing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future"⁹ with Voegelin's statement in the Introduction to *The Ecumenic Age* that "[t]he process of history, and such order as can be discerned in it, is not a story to be told from the beginning to its happy, or unhappy, end; it is a mystery in process of revelation."¹⁰ And Bakhtin himself, as an Orthodox Christian, would probably have felt some sympathy with Voegelin's idea that "[h]istory is not a stream of human beings and their actions in time, but the process of man's participation in a flux of divine presence that has eschatological direction" (ibid.).

The major point of contact between the two, however, is the idea of the dialogic imagination. This was the heart of Bakhtin's thinking about literature, which he thought had as its principal challenge to carry not only the reader but the author as well beyond his or her own horizon in order to encounter a real otherness that can become a window on transcendence.

Voegelin himself expressed this idea by way of his discussion of Plato's distinction between dialectic and eristic discourse.¹¹ Dialectic discourse is open to all questions and ultimately to what Voegelin called the Question with a capital Q, that is, the reaching of consciousness toward the transcendent pole of the existential tension fundamental to all human experience. It is also open to what all partners in dialogue who are also exploring existence under the impulsion of this Question may be able to contribute toward its elucidation. Eristic (literally, "contentious") discourse, on the other hand, tries to impose a

present answer from within its own limited horizon and thus bring dialogue and exploration to a stop.

Bakhtin expressed his conception of these issues by way of his opposition between dialogic and monologic discourse. Monologic meaning is that which can be expressed by a single speaker in a single voice. Bakhtin did not entirely reject the idea of monologic truth, but he thought that there was also truth, and more important truth, that could only take the form of an exploratory conversation rather than a series of propositions. Monologic discourse, even when true, has an unfortunate tendency to try to eclipse the other, more important truth that could only develop in the form of dialogue. What Bakhtin valued in literature was imaginative expressions that maintained dialogic openness through the author's willingness to recognize multiple possibilities of meaning and to allow the work and its voices to probe them beyond his or her own immediate understanding. Like Voegelin, he was explicitly critical of what has commonly gone by the name of "dialectics" in modern usage, whether in its Hegelian or its Marxist versions, since he considered this to be the worst form of monologism. Both, one might say, considered dialectics in this sense to be eristics masquerading as its opposite.

Voegelin spoke of the opposition between the two modes of discourse in connection with philosophy rather than literature, but his conception of philosophy was close to what Bakhtin would have considered the essence of the literary. For Voegelin, philosophy was supremely expressed in the dialogues of Plato, which he believed were not merely decoratively literary presentations of arguments but what might be called scripts for the reader's own exploratory enactments in pursuit of existential wisdom. To read a Platonic dialogue, for Voegelin, was not to decode a series of propositions and analyses of arguments but to reenact inwardly Plato's own balancing and stretching of points of view as he explored the "between" of divine-human dialogue. To do this, the mythic imagination is at least as essential as the logic of argumentation, because the ultimate goal of each lies beyond all propositional expression in a realm of experience where the imagination alone is

able to take the lead, even if it will always need the accompaniment of a highly developed critical faculty to help it avoid falling victim to the enchantment of its own self-generated monologic utopias.

This is what literature and literary criticism at their best also share as their aim. Literary theory, therefore, in reflecting on and thematizing this aim, must ultimately converge with what Voegelin meant by philosophy — that is, the reflective pursuit of existential wisdom — in order to help both literature and philosophy to fulfill their highest calling.

¹Originally published in *Southern Review*, n.s., 7 (1971), pp. 3-48, and reprinted in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 12: *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1990), pp. 134-171.

²*The Institution of Theory* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), pp. 42-45.

³Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957.

⁴“On Henry James’ ‘Turn of The Screw,’” *Southern Review*, new series, 7, 1 (Winter 1971), p. 6.

Heilman's Foreword was not reprinted in *The Collected Works*. References to Voegelin's own text will be to the latter.

⁵I do not mean to imply, however, that all New Critics or all Symbolists exemplify the problematic characteristics outlined below. Heilman and Brooks were not ideological or symbolistic immanentists, as can be seen in Heilman's case from his positive interest in Voegelin's discussion of the problem of immanentism. And Baudelaire, whose favorable treatment by Voegelin will also be discussed below, might well count as a Symbolist poet, even if he came before the school took on its name.

⁶Originally published in *Southern Review* n.s., 17, no. 2 (Spring 1981). Page references here will be to *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, 12: 315-375.

⁷At the 1997 conference in Manchester at which this paper was presented, I said that I did not know whether or not Voegelin was familiar with Bakhtin, since Bakhtin never came up in the conversations I had with him. Professor Thomas Hollweck said on that occasion, however, that Voegelin had discussed Bakhtin with him in favorable terms and that he is in possession of Voegelin's copy of Bakhtin's *Dialogical*

Imagination containing marginal notations in Voegelin's handwriting.

⁸For a while it was frequently said that Bakhtin was the author of some Marxist criticism, which would, of course, have put Voegelin off, but I think that has been successfully refuted by Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson. See their *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Poetics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1990).

⁹*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 166.

¹⁰Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974, p. 6.

¹¹See "Reason: The Classic Experience," *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, 12: 265-291.